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ABSTRACT

Fifteen college classes were identified via standardized student ratings as having had superior testing procedures. Instructors in those classes were asked to describe their evaluation procedures, and interviews were conducted with 27 students randomly selected from the classes. Interviewed students stressed the "communicative" dimension of testing, corroborating pedagogical principles drawn from critical theory (as formulated by Jurgen Habermas) and feminist theory (as formulated by Mary Belensky and associates). Suggestions are offered for transforming classroom evaluation in ways that take into account feminist theory, critical theory, and--most importantly--student voices. (Contains 4 references.) (Author)

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Students' Ways of Testing:

Transforming the Structures of Evaluation

Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of

The American Educational Research Association

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Students' Ways of Testing: Transforming the Structures of Evaluation

Abstract: Fifteen college classes were identified via standardized student ratings as having had superior testing procedures. Instructors in those classes were asked to describe their evaluation procedures, and interviews were conducted with twenty-seven students randomly selected from the classes. Interviewed students stressed the "communicative" dimension of testing, corroborating pedagogical principles drawn from critical theory (as formulated by Jurgen Habermas) and feminist theory (as formulated by Mary Belenky and associates). Suggestions are offered for transforming classroom evaluation in ways that take into account feminist theory, critical theory, and--most importantly--student voices.

INTRODUCTION

Educators in the contemporary era have moved away from the idea that there is an objective, self-evident end result in every subject and every classroom. Reformers in the primary and secondary schools have pushed such programs as Outcomes Based Education which stress the process of learning as much as the end product. Reform has also been in the minds of postsecondary educators as they rally for a broadened curriculum, multiculturalism, and sensitivity to individual needs. If such reforms succeed even partially, the standard evaluation procedures left over from a more positivistic era are going to be woefully outdated. Certainly it is a truism that evaluation will still have to take place. But, how would evaluation be transformed in classrooms that listened to the voices of its participants rather than beginning with a list of instructor-imposed objectives and evaluation devices? For educational "experts" to provide the answers to this question would be to

commit just the kind of error that the reformers want to eliminate in the old system. The voices that need to be heard are those belonging to the subjects of evaluation--the students. This assumption--that college students are knowledgeable and rational participants who should be involved in analyzing the evaluation process-- in itself sets a theoretical framework that is consistent with certain aspects of critical theory and feminist pedagogical theory.

Students in this study were asked to describe what is <u>right</u> about evaluation procedures in current classrooms. The first step in this process was to identify classes that appeared to have evaluation procedures that students appreciated. This was accomplished by looking at standardized student ratings of classes taught at Messiah College, a religiously affiliated liberal arts college located in Grantham, Pennsylvania with an enrollment of 2300. Faculty at the college are required annually to have two courses evaluated using the Instructional Development and Effectiveness Assessment (IDEA) developed at Kansas State University which includes an item on "preparing examinations" as part of the section on teaching methods. Fifteen classes in a recent semester were rated at or above the ninetieth percentile on that particular item. Instructors of those fifteen classes completed a survey which described the evaluation procedures used in their classes. Twenty-seven students randomly selected from the classes completed surveys with open-ended questions about evaluation procedures. An interview was then conducted with each

student, using the survey items as a starting point for discussion.

An initial analysis of the student surveys and interview transcripts uncovered one message that was obvious above all else: students perceive as excellent those evaluation procedures which are rooted in a process of "communication." This initial finding seemed to harmonize with some of the educational emphases suggested by both critical theory and feminist pedagogical theory. Consequently, the student interview transcripts have been reviewed to see how students' perceptions of evaluation correspond with the pedagogical agendas contained in two important works: (1) Jurgen Habermas's The Theory of Communicative Action and (2) Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule's Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.

As part of his detailed and dense analysis of modern western societies, Jurgen Habermas has developed a typology of human acting that distinguises between "strategic" actions and "communicative" actions. Strategic actions are defined as those of an egoistic and self-interested agent directed toward a specific objective goal. Strategic action is also typically seen as competitive--the agent is striving to attain goals in an environment of limited resources where one's own relative success is directly related to the relative failure of other similar agents. In contrast, communicative actions are cooperative. Communicative agents recognize the fact that they can neither

predict nor control all the outcomes of their efforts. Accordingly, they know that they need constantly to be in conversation with the other agents who will be affected by their actions--agents whose actions will also, in turn, affect their own individual efforts.

The work of Belenky and her associates is both narrower in focus than Habermas's and more directly concerned with education. In the final section of their book, the authors suggest specific ways to make postsecondary classrooms places of "connected teaching," places where educators "emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; [where]... they accord respect to and allow time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; [where]...instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns of work based on the problems they are pursuing" (p. 229).

PRINCIPLES OF TRANSFORMED EVALUATION

In the following analysis, the language of students is woven together with the language of Habermas and Belenky in an attempt to root the task of evaluation in the lifeworld of students. It is hoped that the voices of students will be amplified and clarified by hearing them in tandem with the theoretical formulations of Habermas and Belenky. In common with much feminist scholarship and with Habermasian practice, this analysis

will also intentionally and unavoidably mix description with prescription.

Principle #1

Transformed evaluation assumes that college classrooms should be characterized by mutually respectful communication, pedagogical humility, and "empowerment" of students.

Habermas: "It is the relation-to self established by this model of self-criticism that we shall call 'reflective.' Knowing that one does not know has, since Socrates, rightly been regarded as the basis for self-knowledge" (2:75).

Belenky: "[The connected] teacher no longer acts as the embodiment of knowledge or the container of secret criteria and so becomes 'less important'" (208).

When I first decided to study classes that students had identified as having excellent evaluation procedures, I knew that I was moving away from the typical concerns of assessment. The focus was not to be on validity and reliability and test construction; I wanted to know what students perceived as high-quality procedures. But, the first thing I did when I had a list of those fifteen classes was to see how they compared "objectively" to the 190 classes which were not rated as highly by students. Indeed, I found some interesting correlations. The fifteen classes had smaller than average enrollments and tended to be upper division courses within an academic major rather than required general education courses. The selected courses included a large number of fine arts courses but no courses in the natural sciences, social sciences, or mathematics. And, yes, the grades in the fifteen identified courses were generally higher than the average for the college as a whole (Jacobsen, 1993).

Acknowledgement of such correlations does not, however, answer the central question: What are the characteristics of evaluation that students perceive as excellent?

Students kept stressing that evaluation in these classes was part of the whole learning process, not something that was done to them. Even though the interviews focused on evaluation procedures, nearly every student remarked that the selected course had an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. Students frequently made remarks about the milieu of the classroom, saying that everything in the course was geared to "thoroughly comprehending the material," or that "in this class, there was a lot of opportunity to communicate" or that, "in every single class [meeting], you could just talk in a group setting and discuss things and sometimes disagree on points and stuff like that." In these courses, evaluation was imbedded in the larger purposes of the course.

Principle #2

Transformed evaluation assumes that each student will need and want to make connections between classroom content and his or her own experiences.

Habermas: "Because they are structures of a lifeworld, the structures important for the maintenance of a [social] system, those with which the identity of a society stands or falls, are accessible only to a reconstructive analysis that begins with the members' intuitive knowledge" (2:151).

Belenky: "The connected class recognizes the core of truth in the subjectivist view that each of us has a unique perspective that is in some sense irrefutably 'right' by virtue of its existence" (222).

The classroom must touch the "lifeworld" of its participants, and the starting point must be each student's reality. It is probably easy to see how this applies to teaching in general--most professors try to accommodate new material to the prior knowledge of students and try to build meaningful connections with students' experiences. But the students who were interviewed want this accommodation to extend to evaluation.

Almost all of the teachers involved in this study reported that part of their testing policy was to allow students some significant input regarding the content of material that was to be evaluated. In some cases, this meant simply giving multiple options for essay tests and letting students choose those that they could answer best. In courses that required book or literature reviews, it meant that students were allowed a number of choices from which to select their own reading materials. In the art courses, students selected their finest work for inclusion in their portfolios. Most students valued papers and written projects. One said, "By spending a month or two researching information and then having to put it together in a creative and well-organized manner, I not only learn the information more thoroughly but I also retain it much longer."

Particular question formats were criticized because they did not allow students to display their understanding of the class material. Fill-in-the-blank options were lambasted as "try to read the teacher's mind" questions. Another student mused about what was wrong with multiple choice questions: "All of the

complicated ways, all those complex words, questions that are really long questions, and you try to figure out if you cancel two out and you have two left and according to what you remember in class they both make sense." A student tried to explain what was wrong with true/false questions: "The idea is to open your mind, consider all aspects of a given issue. We are supposed to be getting away from black and white thinking here and then we use an evaluation [method] that to me represents the antithesis of an open-minded look at things... [Instead of] something that demonstrates that you know, that you comprehend, that you haven't just memorized a bunch of garbage for a test."

Principle #3

Transformed evaluation requires an ongoing conversation in the classroom about evaluation. Evaluation is a dialogic process.

Habermas: "Communicative action relies on a cooperative process of interpretation in which participants relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective worlds"(2:120). "[T]he interpretive task consists in incorporating the other's interpretation of the situation into one's own in such a way that in the revised version 'his' external world and 'my' external world can--against the background of 'our' lifeworld--be relativized in relation to 'the' world, and the divergent situation definitions can be brought to coincide sufficiently" (1:100).

Belenky: "The connected class constructs truth not through conflict but through 'consensus'" (223).

Student feelings and feedback about the classroom (and especially about its evaluative dimensions) need to be included in the process by which evaluation procedure themselves are determined and carried out. Students liked having several

successive projects with similar instructions. With each assignment, the student had a clearer idea of what the instructor considered excellent. They also appreciated that they could see their own skill development in an obvious way.

Many of the interviewed students valued oral reports and group projects. One student reminisced about an engineering class taken in a previous semester where students worked in groups of three. He said, "We used our books and we consulted the other two people and we took the test together as a group. They [the tests] were a lot harder, they were very hard but that's the whole thing. It's like you make them harder but still consult, and one person or the other person remembers and that's real life. I worked in an engineering building--an engineering consulting firm--and they were constantly going in offices and asking questions and looking up in books."

In one of the identified classes, the professor kept track of whether students met a simple requirement each class period--coming to class with index cards of questions over the reading assignment. These questions were then used to stimulate discussion. An interviewed student noted that this technique not only encouraged students to keep up with their reading, but that it helped everyone develop "an adult kind of attitude. We sat in class and talked about it [the material]. That was much more helpful than sitting down and lecturing."

Not one of these instructors required that papers come in without the name of the author attached, yet interviewed students

never once mentioned any worry about a lack of objectivity. The principle of blind review makes sense in publishers' offices when personal or professional biases need to be protected against in a special way. In the classroom, the goal is to engage students in learning. The interviewed students wanted fairness, but they saw that as deriving from open communication among themselves and between the students and professor.

Principle #4

Transformed evaluation clearly distinguishes between evaluation which is content-oriented and that which is competitive.

Habermas: "We call an action oriented to success instrumental when we consider it under the aspect of following technical rules of action and assesss the efficiency of an intervention into a complex of circumstances and events. We call an action oriented to success strategic when we consider it under the aspect of following rules of rational choice and assess the efficacy of influencing the decisions of a rational opponent." (1:285)

Belenky: "Teaching and certification of competence, at least as usually practiced, are quite different and often opposing functions; and where certification is deemed necessary, it should be detached from teaching by, for example, using external examiners to evaluate the students' performance." (208)

The clearest single finding to emerge from student interviews was that students want to be judged on their own merits, not in comparison to others. The idea that someone else must do worse in order for them to do better is anathema. The questionnaire was used at the beginning of each interview asked students to identify which of seven common goals of evaluation were "legitimate." Students endorsed most of these objectives, but one item was deemed never to be legitimate: comparison with

other students. Twenty-four of the interviewed students said it was never legitimate to use classroom evaluation for comparative purposes, and the remaining three respondents said it was appropriate only in conjunction with other purposes. As they thought back to their experience in these courses, students never once mentioned any role for competition between students. Instead, the focus was always on the student's personal achievement of competence and understanding.

We need to be clear as to the purpose of evaluation. If a course has the purpose of "education" (in its most meaningful sense), then let evaluation be of the communicative, developmental variety. At those points in schooling when "instrumental" purposes must be served, we will need to develop instruments that are geared to individual student needs. To quote once again from Lohmer: "Some of these [psychometric and philosophical] problems can be avoided if the goal of measurement is to understand what students understand rather than simply to rank order students on a common scale. 'What is the student's current conception of the problem?' is a different question from 'Who can best solve problems of this type?' The first question presumes a classification; the second, a rank ordering. Psychometric theory from Galton to Rasch has been developed to answer questions of the second sort; only recently have efforts been made to develop a psychometrics capable of addressing the first question" (1993, p. 18).

CONCLUSIONS

"Schooling," as such, may well be irredeemably systematic, strategic, and competitive in orientation, but the "learning" activities that are housed in the school system need not be so--indeed ought not to be so. A transformed approach will seek to maximize the communicative dynamics of learning within the enduringly strategic structures of any given school system. That means making space unapologetically for the subjective and personal. In a transformed classroom, students and professor will work to establish a milieu in which each student has the opportunity to flourish. Evaluation would be used to enhance that flourishing.

Rather than focusing on "knowledge," as so often has been the case in the past, classroom evaluation in the years ahead will increasingly need to be transformed into terms of growth in "meaning." In the contemporary world, where no one can master any one discipline (let alone all the disciplines) the goal of education cannot be exhaustive knowledge. Instead, education must more and more be part of a process of self construction where the student seeks to integrate helpful skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values into a personal web of meaning. This is by no means a merely personal or private affair. The construction of meaning always takes place in a larger social context that will include an objective, systems dimension. Nonetheless, it does mean that external "objective" evaluation of how much "learning" has taken place will become less important as we seek

to develop other more subjective (and biographically narrative) ways of describing and evaluating the "learning" that has taken place. In the terms of Habermas, such restructuring would emphasize "communicative" rather than "strategic" evaluation. In the terms of Belenky, "connected evaluation" would be stressed above mere certification of competence. In either case, evaluation procedures within the college classroom would be recast in a way that is (to use the term of one of our conference keynote speakers, the psychologist Jerome Bruner) "courteous" to students.

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